UCCE Master Gardeners of Lake Tahoe

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How to Help Your Plants Survive a Drought Year

Spring Newsletter 2014

Greetings,
Lake Tahoe Master Gardeners strive to meet the horticulture needs of Lake Tahoe Basin Community, we are happy to extend research-based information to fellow gardeners on home horticulture. Our Master Gardener volunteers receive training and certification from the University of California Cooperative Extension and provide practical scientific gardening information.

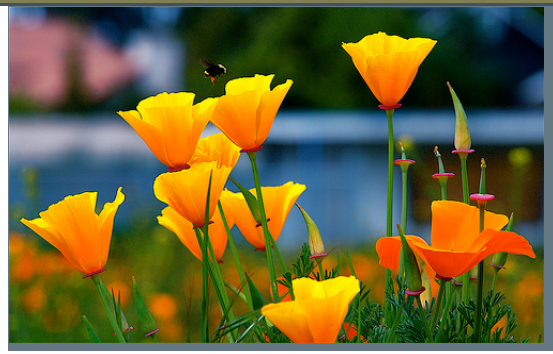
Come join us at a upcoming event or workshop!

We can be reached at 530-543-1501 ext. 101
Email us at laketahoemg@ucanr.edu

Upcoming Events

Find us at South Tahoe Earth Day
Bijou Community Park
Saturday, April 26th
10 am - 4:00pm
for more information click here

June Day Jamboree
Vegetable Gardening Seminar & Plant Sale
Lake Tahoe Community College Demonstration Garden SLT
Saturday, June 7



by Carolyn Meiers

9 am -1:00pm
for more information click here

Green Thumb Gardening
Workshop Series
Lake Tahoe Community College Demonstration Garden, SLT
UC Davis Tahoe City Field Station, Tahoe City
North Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden, Incline Village
Starting June 16-July 30th
5:30pm - 6:30pm
for more information click here

Look for us at South Lake Tahoe's Farmer's Markets this Summer!

Reaching For the Rake?

by Jennifer Cressy
Every spring as the snow starts to reveal my dormant winter garden I am tempted to reach for my spring rake and begin tidying up. Tahoe gardeners know this impulse all too well. Here there is so much work to be done each spring; collecting pine cones and broken branches, raking excess pine needles, adding compost to the soil, pruning damaged branches, tuning up the irrigation system, the list goes on. We cannot help but want to get started now with the help of our trusty rakes so we can enjoy our gardens by June...I mean July.
Some tips to help guide your rake:
* Hold off raking over your perennial beds. Perennials will grow through a layer of pine needle mulch. The existing mulch will protect their tender new shoots from freezing temperature swings as they harden off.
* Mulch also regulates soil temperature that will delay plant growth until nighttime temperatures warm up. This too protects tender new shoots from freezing. There is much to learn about

Drought is a relative term, but is referred to frequently of late. The following is a quote from David Phillips, author of "The Climates of Canada", 1990. "There are no universally accepted definitions of drought. Any extended dry weather that is worse than expected and that leads to measurable losses can correctly be called a drought."
As Master Gardeners it is time to rededicate ourselves to conservation of garden water use as well as household water use. We need to avoid running water wastefully, fix water leaks, and consider how to help our plants exist with less water during drought conditions.
Hopefully our gardens have most or some drought tolerant and adapted plants that will survive with less water. (See "Plants with Low Water Needs for Our Gardens", this issue) Look around your garden and make sure your plants are well placed regarding sun, soil and water. Consider moving them if necessary, and place plants requiring the same water needs close together.
Water very early in the morning when evaporation is slowest, and avoid sprinklers that broadcast high and wide if possible. Drip systems and low to ground watering is best. When watering by hand, water deeply, then don't water again until the top inch of soil is dry. Trees and shrubs also should be watered deeply. Annuals and perennials will need more surface water, but help them adapt with some deep water when possible.
We know how important compost is to healthy plants, and it is a significant element in drought control. Fall and spring applications worked into the soil will provide a beneficial jumpstart for your plants. Mulching with at least two inches of cover will help hold moisture and add interest to your garden design.
A quick stroll through your garden on a regular basis is not only pleasant but will alert you to potential problems that are water related such as curling leaves, drooping heads and stressed plants. Attention and correction is necessary.
And if some plants don't make it, the compost pile is waiting. Consider replacements that are more drought tolerant. California poppies will be a new addition to my garden this spring. They like it "dry".
Season's come and go. Change is inevitable and we must modify our gardens accordingly.

mulch, read http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G6960 for more information.
* Raking over new shoots can damage them. Take a close look before you potentially damage your plants with a rake.
* Repurpose aged disease free deciduous leave as mulch under your trees, shrubs and garden beds. It will quickly decompose into the soil to improve soil and plant health. This resource can also be composted then added to your garden soil.
* Rake pine needles from paving stone walkways and turfed areas. Pine needles make attractive and useful garden mulch. They last a long time and resist compaction to allow water and air to penetrate the soil.
* Remember to rake all pine needles 5-feet away from structures and remove the pine straw before fire season. Refer to http://www.livingwithfire.info/tahoe/ for a detailed description on how to manage your landscape where the risk of wildfire is high.

http://www.livingwithfire.info/tahoe/

Squash: Start Now for a Celebration of Summer

by Bonnie Turnbull
Part 1 Start Your Seeds
Squash blossoms are so sunny and grand; they are a celebration of summer itself. Brighten your salad with them. So succulent and sweet! The vines are one of my favorite plants. Hand-sized, scalloped leaves cascade over the ground in waves, and then huge, butter-yellow blossoms pop out and grow into vegetables as fast as you will eat them. What could be more perfect?

Let's make every drop of water count!

Resources:

San Francisco Chronicle, 2/23/14, Section H
Dry-Land Gardening: A Xeriscaping Guide for Dry-Summer, Cold-Winter Climates. Jennifer Bennett. 1998
The Climates of Canada. David Phillips. 1990
http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm/cmarchive/vol19no1/climates.html

Okay, I'll admit it. I am passionate about this plant Americans have enjoyed growing for 10,000 years. It is one of the easiest vegetables to grow here in Tahoe-even though all your neighbors will swear that you cannot grow anything so grand.

True, you will need to overcome a few challenges. Summer squash, whether zucchini or yellow, thrives on months of warm sunshine, fertile soil, and steady moisture, none of which sound much like Tahoe, do they? And just to get this out of the way-forget your dreams of growing pumpkin patches for your kids or harvesting winter squash for brown-sugared baking at Thanksgiving. Sorry. Those must fully mature and will be frostbitten long before they are ready.

Let's start with the months of warm sunshine. Since squash is the fruit of the mature plant, the more you extend the growing season, the more squash you will harvest. Since we only have about 40 almost-for-sure frost-free days in the Tahoe Basin, and our cold nights make slower growth than the seed packets promise, even the quickest-growing summer squash benefits from a jump-start on the growing season.

I plant them inside in late spring, usually when I find myself dispersing snow piles, so eager am I to get to that dirt. However, you'll have to resist planting your seeds before late April or they will be bursting from the pot before you can get them in the ground.

Choose bush varieties if you do not have much garden space. Choose vine varieties if you want to add volume and drama to your garden. Spreading is one of their great beauties.

Kids, and the kid in me, love to watch them sprout. They are robust little seedlings: tough and exuberant. Since you will only want one plant per vegetable-loving person in your family unless you want loads of blossoms to eat, your few seedlings will fit upon one south-facing windowsill.

So much has been written on starting seeds, that I will not go into detail here. However, it is worth noting a few particulars.

1. A packet comes with many seeds, but resist! In the end you will only select a few champions for planting.
2. They are warmth and sun-lovers, so you will need to supplement light and heat if you don't have a south-facing window that will keep them at 70-90 degrees F for 6 hours a day.
3. To get them started, I nest my pots inside the clear plastic containers baby greens come in so they have their own tiny

Re-imagining Grass in Lake Tahoe Home Landscapes

by Michael Plansky
To most people, especially avid home gardeners, the mention of "grass" elicits images of turf, lawn, playfield, Kentucky Bluegrass seed mixes and instant greenswards from sod. Not as obvious to many is that we could not feed the world's enormous and expanding population without staple grains which are themselves domesticated grass hybrids from wild prairies of yore. The water required to sustain these agricultural monocrops is enormous compared to residential landscapes. Nonetheless, the potential of thinking locally to act globally is increasingly raising awareness about the impacts of water consumption and over-fertilization of home landscapes. Turf grass is perhaps the easiest class of plant material to single out. Furthermore, managing turf grass in Tahoe can be daunting because of our unpredictable mountain climate and generally poor, sandy soils, as well as what amounts to a monoculture lacking the diversity to withstand changing conditions. Maintaining that perfect lawn appearance is an endless battle, while native and adapted grass species can serve much more dynamic landscape functions over time.
The taxonomic complexity and sheer number of true-grasses - Poaceae family or Garminoids - are to be distinguished from their generally moister-soil monocot cousins - sedges & rushes - despite the similar single-leaf-form. Grass species are classified under genus such as Poa, Elymus and Festuca, to name a few. Grass species and cultivars can be difficult to identify and can be hard to appreciate on their own. That doesn't mean they should be ignored for Tahoe home landscape design strategies, especially over time!
There is some grey area between the two types of grasses but it is most helpful to understand the difference between sod-forming turf grasses and native or adapted bunch grasses. Sod-formers rely on greenhouses for consistent moisture and warmth.
You will have sprouts in about a week. Keep them moist and warm until after the danger of frost has passed. Planting in mid- June is often a safe bet in Tahoe, but check the weather trend. You may even find that a little earlier may work out for you. Or take a risk on the early side, and be prepared to insulate them if we get a surprise freeze.
Part 2 Planting Time
Seedlings do not survive the transition from the gentle climate of your house, to the extremes of outside without a little preparation. They will need to be "hardened off".
Over a week or ten days, get them accustomed to strong sunlight, relative dryness and cold nights. I start by simply opening their window for several hours during
the warmth of the day. Increase the amount of direct sunshine several hours every day and water less frequently without causing wilt. Since squash are warm season crops, I insulate mine with pine needles or angle salvaged windows over them for additional warmth. However, if hardened off, they will usually survive temperatures down to freezing.
Plant where they will get "full sun", six or more hours. Raised beds, will give them a faster start because their roots will be warmer in the early season. Five-gallon or larger pots can also do the trick, especially for the more compact bush variety.
Our environment can be brutal on plants so let's address the other concerns: soil and water. Though squash tolerates poor soils, you will be much happier with your harvest, and save water, if you improve the dirt. Mix organic matter, compost, into your soil to loosen it. Or, use purchased "garden soil", which already has a good ratio of organic and mineral components. The nutrients in our soils are not very available to plants, so adding a balanced, slow-release fertilizer will assure a steady source of nutrients throughout the growing season.
Keep the roots moist. Since the squash itself is primarily water, you know that the amount of water will impact your bounty. Drip irrigation is the best approach in Tahoe not only because it conserves water, but also because those big leaves have a tendency to mildew when kept damp. You will be happy you added compost to the soil because it will retain water more in the root zone. To be confident that your plants are getting enough water, dig down into the root zone about four inches. If it is moist, your

stolons (runners) and rhizomes (underground stems) to form continuous mats that are usually mowed periodically. While bunch grasses may also use these strategies to take over a piece of land and can be coaxed into forming continuous mats, their biological strategy to leave space between clumps is perhaps the primary quality of their broadly overlooked potential for home landscape design.

The beauty of landscape design emerges when we recognize that aesthetics and ecological function are not mutually exclusive. Caltrans, the Forest Service and other public works agencies have long valued the practicality of grass species to stabilize slopes, build soils and keep down dust on disturbed lands.

In regard to the role of grasses in our human modified Tahoe landscapes, it appears a shift in public perception is inevitable as the concern over water resources in our region mounts. The flanks of highways & bi-ways as we whiz by in our cars are perceived much differently from our home landscapes which often serve social & environmental functions such as for child's play, pets and its cooling effects. But more often than not
lawns serve as nothing more than a visual dressing or status symbol, especially in commercial applications.

Kathleen Brenzel, Garden Editor of Sunset Magazine states "It's hard to deny that lawn grass uses more water than almost any other plant" (Eaton & Sullivan 2014). The popularity of recent publications, such as Beautiful No Mow Yards (Hadden 2012), Reimagining the California Lawn (Bornstein, Fross & O'Brien 2011) and The American Meadow Garden (Greenlee 2009) attest to the trend towards replacing the functions of conventional lawns informed by the resilient diversity of prairie ecology while supporting ecosystem services locally. The key to designing successfully with grasses native & adapted to Tahoe is understanding that the "space between" bunches, and the "successional evolution" of natural grass landscapes can be used to our advantage. Disturbed areas such as sinks, steep-slopes and nutrient poor soil environments can all be transformed with grasses started from seed from reputable local seed banks. What may begin as an attractive "wildflower meadow" or "wavy border" groundcover may transform into an understory mosaic of edible shrubs interspersed with grasses, and perhaps will eventually be canopied by tree cover, building and improving the soil structure all along. Tahoe bunch grasses can be a powerful first step for

plants are fine and you should not worry when you see them wilting during the hottest, mid-afternoons. They will spring back when the sun goes down.

Another technique to save water is to insulate the roots from extremes of temperature and wind. Give your soil a covering or mulch. You may have sawdust, shredded newspaper, grass clippings or pine needles available. They work quite well. However you may prefer the neater look of a commercial bark.

Harvest Time

Summer squash is tender and tastiest if harvested when the skin is still soft enough that you can nick it with your fingernail, ideally no more than six inches long. It's great fun to see just how big they can grow, but you will sacrifice other squashes if your plant stores all its energy in one big one. Cut the stem about an inch above the fruit. You may want to wear gloves because the vines can irritate skin.

Oh, and those wonderful flowers I promised you! Squash plants have both male and female flowers. Investigate and you will find that the more numerous male blossoms grow on thin stems, while the female flowers have a small bulge-a tiny squash-at their bases. Females produce the actual squashes, but bees must transport pollen from male to female flowers before one can get started, so keep that in mind as you cut flowers for stuffing with cheese or deep-frying. Harvest only male blossoms unless you want to slow your harvest.

Cut squash blossoms at midday when the petals are open. Leave one inch of stem. Rinse them gently, then store them in ice water in the refrigerator for up to two days. If you've never eaten squash blossoms, you are in for a treat.

In the fall when freeze threatens, it you may find yourself, like me, running outside in the chill of evening to cover up your babies because you just can't give them up. But hopefully, you've already had such an abundance that you were able to give them away to your neighbors and show them that "Yes, you can grow vegetables in Tahoe!"

Summer Squash:
http://www.gardening.cornell.edu/homegardening/scene6420.html
Summer Squash:
http://ucanr.org/sites/gardenweb/files/117472.pdf
Squash in Your Garden:

shaping the form and function of our home gardens over time while allowing the unrivaled processes of nature to use resources efficiently.
Waste can be minimized with site specific design versus "cookie-cutter" approaches that cater to a "mow & blow" mentality. Let that litter lie to improve your soils without spending money and adding unnecessary inputs. In upcoming issues of the Lake Tahoe Master Gardener Newsletter look for articles that discuss specific grass species for the Lake Tahoe Basin and how the traits unique to each species can benefit your home landscape, including strategies to meet BMP & Defensible Space requirements.
Learn how to blend form, texture & ecology, how to highlight, remediate & revitalize, and accent, frame & define areas of your property. Leave the burdensome maintenance of conventional lawn care behind.

Hadden, Evelyn J. 2012. Beautiful No-Mow Yards: 50 Amazing Lawn Alternatives. Portland, OR,Timber Press.
Bornstein, Carol and David Fross. 2011. Reimagining the California Lawn: Water-conserving Plants, Practices, and Designs. Los Olivos, CA: Cachuma Press.
Greenlee, John. 2009. The American Meadow Garden. Portland OR: Timber Press.
Christopherson, John and Wayne S. Johnson. no date. Turf and Erosion Control Grasses for the Tahoe Basin. Reno, NV: University of Nevada Cooperative Extension.

Retrieved January 2014:
http://www.unce.unr.edu/publications/files/ho/other/fs9253.pdf

http://cestanislaus.ucanr.edu/files/111648.pdf
Zucchini:
http://ucanr.org/sites/uccemarin/files/30765.pdf

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